

TOURISM INTELLIGENCE CORNER

It is truism that tourism is undergoing a tectonic transformation. Amidst geopolitical turmoil and threatened natural resources, Caribbean destinations are scrambling to secure and sustain their competitive edge in a globally expanding economy by exploiting investments, infrastructures and images

THE BLITZ

With constant tourism growth (+6% to 1.1 million in the first quarter of 2008), the *Dominican Republic* is investing over \$1.3 billion in tourism infrastructure expansions, including the establishment of luxury resorts such as Four Seasons and Ritz Carlton, in addition to the regeneration of a vibrant coastal towns, the establishment of unique boutique hotels, the inauguration of a new convention center, and the rejuvenation of the island's tourism corridor.

Likewise, *Turks & Caicos* is undergoing a series of expansions including new upscale resorts, hotel upgrades, the completion of a new marina and private airstrip. In similar vein, *Jamaica* has experienced double-digit growth, and is feverishly expanding its tourism industry with resort renovations, additional airlift, new destination brand initiatives, and the expansion of 10.000 new rooms within two years, thus bringing total room numbers to approximately 40.000, which also is the espoused destination accommodation capacity of Dubai by 2010.

Cancun also launched a new brand 'deeply unique' to position itself as a fully integrated tourist destination where sun, sea and sand are not the only attractions, but culture, adventure, conventions, and gastronomy, as well as luxury spas also position Cancun as a premium quality destination. In a similar pursuit of 'niche-fication', *Barbados* has set its sights on the tourism health and tourism wellness industry, which is now valued at over \$50 billion.

It seems that there is no shortage of leading examples of the Caribbean 'tourism blitz'; and make no mistake that within this dynamic environment, other destinations such as Aruba, Bahamas and Caymans are following suite, and are contemplating similar strategies of investments and innovation.

Yet, is this really a novelty? Will the expansion of destination infrastructures and destination images suffice in sustaining

destination competitiveness, including the welfare and quality of life of both dwellers and travelers? If history and theory serves us right, and we're willing to reflect on data and developments (which is certainly not S.O.P.), then we could be in for an interesting ride of (un-) expected twists, turns, turbulence and turmoil.

THE WAVE

Throughout the relatively short socioeconomic history of tourism in the Caribbean, spanning the 20th century, we have witnessed at least three seismic shifts in travel and tourism. Today, we are witnessing yet another evolutionary phase, as the fourth wave in tourism washes upon our shores. Although for some it may seem as déjà vu, there are at least two differences: time and space.

In terms of time, today we live in a fast-paced, interconnected and time-deficient world, in which 'action' and 'attention' are the new competitive drivers. Beyond time, and contrary to predictions of the 'death of distance' in the late 1990s, (geographic) location and (geological) spaces have become quintessential investment factors in today's global economy. Island spaces and the management of space are strategic imperatives in the search for sustainability.

We see, however, a society that has evolved through different shock waves, in which traditional and unique 'habitudes' and 'spaces' have ebbed from the seashores. Yet, destinations still seek sustainability in the expansion and growth of their finite (and fragile) island architectures, while they hide behind the rhetoric of 'balancing economic, social and environmental issues and the pursuit of happiness for future generations'

THE ABILITY

Sustainability is not achieved by some strategic or magical balancing act, but is built on resources and assets, competencies and capabilities that are non-mobile, embedded, rare, valuable, ephemeral, and socially complex. Simply put, any resource or artifact that can be copied, bought (or sold) and easily transferred (from one context to another) does not provide a sustainable foundation.

Thus, although destinations increasingly benchmark and imitate so-called 'best' practices under conditions of economic uncertainty and competitive turbulence

(precisely due to lack of information and intelligence), it is, paradoxically enough, exactly this 'monkey-see-monkey-do' and 'mine-is-bigger' type of behavior that catalyzes and propels an unsustainable future. Indeed, in their well-intended efforts to become better, destinations copy that which ultimately makes them weaker.

Sustainability is thus first and foremost an ability to assemble and exploit appropriate combinations of assets, and continuously enhance existing resources (regeneration) and create new resources (reinvention). In contemporary environments, sustainability emphasizes the creation, integration and reconfiguration of internal and external assets to thrive in a high-velocity and turbulent economy. This ability shapes the entrepreneurial mindset and fosters systemic innovation, which is the sole source of sustainability.

THE CALL

In every community there is work to be done; in every nation there are wounds to heal; and in every heart there is the power to do it. The strength of a nation lies not in numbers, but in the hearts of its people. Every dream starts with a glimpse of hope and faith. Moreover, the call lies not with those who have been appointed in function, but from within the community. While individuals may be drops, a community is represents an ocean of opportunities and potential, connecting past to future. For when one generation plants a tree, another gets the shade.

In the spirit of George Bernard Shaw, while reasonable people adapt themselves to the world, unreasonable people attempt to adapt the world to themselves; genuine development, therefore, depends on unreasonable people who seek emancipation of mental slavery. Sustainability is thus simply a faithful act of freedom...

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